

CONSPIRACY
OF THE
BLACKS AT CHARLESTON, S. C.,
IN 1822.

"THE following account of an intended insurrection of the slaves in Charleston, S. C. and its most timely discovery, is extracted from a pamphlet published by the authority of the corporation of Charleston in 1822.

"On Thursday, the 30th of May last, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the intendant of Charleston was informed by a gentleman of great respectability, (who that morning had returned from the country,) that a favorite and confidential slave of his had communicated to him, on his arrival in town, a conversation which had taken place at the market on the Saturday preceding, between himself and a black man; which afforded strong reasons for believing that a revolt and insurrection were in contemplation among a proportion at least of our black population. The corporation was forthwith summoned to meet at 5 o'clock, for the purpose of hearing the narrative of the slave who had given this information to his master, to which meeting the attendance of his excellency the Governor was solicited; with which invitation he promptly complied. Between, however, the hours of 3 and 5 o'clock, the gentleman who had conveyed the information to the intendant, having again examined his slave, was induced to believe, that the negro fellow who had communicated the intelligence of the intended revolt to the slave in question, belonged to Messrs J. & D. Paul, Broad street, and resided in their premises. Accordingly, with a promptitude worthy of all praise, without waiting for the interposition of the civil authority, he applied to the Messrs Paul, and had the whole of their male servants committed to the guard house, until the individual who had accosted the

slave of this gentleman, on the occasion previously mentioned, could be identified from among them.

“ On the assembling of the Corporation at five, the slave of this gentleman was brought before them, having previously identified Mr. Paul’s William as the man who had accosted him in the market; he then related the following circumstances :

“ On Saturday afternoon last, (my master being out of town,) I went to market; after finishing my business, I strolled down the wharf below the fish market, from which I observed a small vessel in the stream with a singular flag; whilst looking at this object, a black man (Mr. Paul’s William) came up to me, and remarking the subject which engaged my attention, said, I have often seen a flag with the number 76 on it, but never with 96 before. After some trifling conversation on this point, he remarked with considerable earnestness to me, Do you know that something serious is about to take place? To which I replied, no. Well, said he, there is, and many of us are determined to right ourselves! I asked him to explain himself—when he remarked, why we are determined to shake off our bondage; and for this purpose we stand on a good foundation, many have joined, and if you will go with me, I will show you the man who has the list of names, who will take yours down—I was so much astonished and horror-struck at this information, that it was a moment or two before I could collect myself sufficiently to tell him that I would have nothing to do with this business, that I was satisfied with my condition, that I was grateful to my master for his kindness, and wished no change. I left him instantly, lest, if this fellow afterwards got into trouble, and I had been seen conversing with him, in so public a place, I might be suspected and thrown into difficulty. I did not, however, remain easy under the burden of such a secret, and consequently determined to consult a free man of color, named ———, and to ask his advice. On conferring with this friend, he urged me with great earnestness to communicate what had passed between Mr. Paul’s man and myself to my master, and not to lose a moment in so doing. I took his advice, and not waiting even for the return of my master to town, I mentioned it to my mistress

and young master. On the arrival of my master, he examined me as to what had passed, and I stated to him what I have mentioned to yourselves.

“William, the man aforementioned, was then examined;—after much equivocation, he admitted all these facts. The Council being under the conviction that he was in the possession of more information than he had thought proper to disclose, kept him confined.

“Things remained in this state for six or seven days, until about the 8th of June, when William, who had been a week in solitary confinement, beginning to fear that he would soon be led forth to the scaffold, for summary execution, in an interview with Mr. Napier, (one of the committee appointed to examine him,) confessed, that he had for some time known of the plot, that it was very extensive, embracing an indiscriminate massacre of the whites, and that the blacks were to be headed by an individual, who carried about with him a charm which rendered him invulnerable. He stated, that the period fixed for the rising, was on the second Sunday in June. This information was without delay conveyed to his excellency the Governor, and a Council forthwith convened. Whatever faith we might have been disposed to place in the unsupported and equivocal testimony of William, it was not conceived to be a case in which our doubts should influence our efforts for preparation and defence. Measures were consequently promptly taken, to place the city guard in a state of the utmost efficiency. Sixteen hundred rounds of ball cartridges were provided, and the sentinels and patrols ordered on duty with loaded arms. Such had been our fancied security, that the guard had previously gone on duty without muskets, with sheathed bayonets and bludgeons.

“On the night of Friday the 14th, the information of William was amply confirmed by a gentleman who called on the Intendant, who stated that a faithful slave belonging to his family, in whom he had the utmost confidence, informed him that a contemplated insurrection of the blacks would occur on the succeeding Sunday, the 16th, at 12 o'clock at night, which, if not prevented, would inevitably take place at that hour. This slave also stated that one of his companions had informed him, that Rolla, belonging

to Governor Bennet, had communicated to him the intelligence of the intended insurrection, and had asked him to join. That he remarked, in the event of their rising, they would not be without help, as the people from San Domingo and Africa would assist them in obtaining their liberty, if they only made the motion first themselves. That if A—— wished to know more, he had better attend their meetings, where all would be disclosed. After this, at another interview, Rolla informed A——, that the plan was matured, and that on Sunday night, the 16th June, a force would cross from James' Island and land on South Bay, march up and seize the Arsenal and guard-house, that another body at the same time would seize the Arsenal on the Neck, and a third would rendezvous in the vicinity of his master's mills. They would then sweep the town with fire and sword, not permitting a single white soul to escape.

“The sum of this intelligence was laid before the Governor, who convening the officers of the militia, took such measures as were deemed the best adapted to the approaching exigency of Sunday night. On the 16th, at 10 o'clock at night, the military companies, which were placed under the command of Col. R. Y. Hayne, were ordered to rendezvous for guard.

“The conspirators finding the whole town encompassed at 10 o'clock, by the most vigilant patrols, did not dare to show themselves, whatever might have been their plans. In the progress of the subsequent investigation, it was distinctly in proof, that but for these military demonstrations, the effort would unquestionably have been made; that a meeting took place on Sunday afternoon, the 16th, at 4 o'clock, of several of the ring-leaders, at Denmark Vesey's, for the purpose of making their preliminary arrangements, and that early in the morning of Sunday, Denmark despatched a courier, to order down some country negroes from Goose Creek, which courier had endeavored in vain to get out of town.

“No development of the plot having been made on Sunday night, and the period having passed, which was fixed on for its explosion, it now became the duty of the civil authority to take immediate steps for the apprehension,

commitment, and trial of those against whom they were in possession of information.

"The number of blacks arrested was one hundred and thirty-one; of these thirty-five were executed, fifty-one acquitted, the rest were sentenced to be transported.

"Among those executed, was one free black by the name of Denmark Vesey, who was considered the leader of the plot. In the revolutionary war, Captain Vesey of Charleston was engaged in supplying the French in St. Domingo with slaves from St. Thomas. In the year 1781 he purchased Denmark, a boy of about 14 years of age, and afterwards brought him to Charleston, where he proved for twenty years a faithful slave. In 1800, Denmark drew a prize of \$1500 in the lottery, and purchased his freedom from his master for 600 dollars. From that period till the time of his apprehension he worked as a carpenter, distinguished for his great strength and activity. Among his color he was always looked up to with awe and respect. His temper was impetuous and domineering in the extreme, qualifying him for the despotic rule of which he was ambitious. All his passions were ungovernable and savage, and to his numerous wives and children, he displayed the haughty and capricious cruelty of an eastern bashaw."

Among the most prominent of the other conspirators, was a slave by the name of Gullah Jack. "Born a conjuror and a physician, in his own country, (for in Angola they are matters of inheritance,) he practised these arts in this country for fifteen years, without its being generally known among the whites. Vesey, who left no engines of power unessayed, seems, in an earlier stage of his designs, to have turned his eye on this necromancer, aware of his influence with his own countrymen, who are distinguished both for their credulous superstition and clannish sympathies. Such was their belief in his invulnerability, that his charms and amulets were in request, and he was regarded as a man, who could *only* be harmed by the *treachery* of his fellows. Even those negroes who were born in this country seem to have spoken of his charmed invincibility with a confidence which looked much like belief."

Of the motives of Vesey in forming this conspiracy.

"the belief is altogether justifiable, that his end would have been answered, if, after laying our city in ashes, and moistening its cinders with blood, he could have embarked with a part of the pillage of our banks for San Domingo; leaving a large portion of his deluded followers to the exterminating desolation of that justice which would have awaited, in the end, a transient success."

The following is extracted from the testimony of a black man on the trial of the conspirators:

"About the 1st of June, I saw in the public papers a statement that the white people were going to build missionary houses for the blacks, which I carried and showed to Peter, and said, see the good they are going to do for us; when, he said,—What of that?—Have you not heard, that on the 4th of July, the whites are going to create a false alarm of fire, and every black that comes out will be killed, in order to thin them? Do you think they would be so barbarous? (said I) Yes! (said he) I do!—I fear they have a knowledge of an army from San Domingo, and they would be right to do it, to prevent us joining that army, if it should march towards this land! I was then very much alarmed.

"Last Tuesday or Wednesday week, Peter said to me—You see, my lad, how the white people have got to windward of us? You won't, said I, be able to do any thing. O, yes! (he said) we will! By George, we are obliged to! He said, all down this way ought to meet, and have a collection to purchase powder. What, said I, is the use of powder?—the whites can fire three times to our once. He said, but *'twill be such a dead time of the night, they won't know what is the matter, and our horse companies will go about the streets and prevent the whites from assembling.* I asked him—Where will you get horses? Why, said he, there are many butcher boys with horses; and there are the livery stables, where we have several candidates; and the waiting men, belonging to the white people of the horse companies, will be told to take away their masters' horses. He asked me if my master was not a horseman? I said, Yes! Has he not got arms in his house? I answered, Yes! Can't they be got at? I said, Yes! Then (said he) it is good to have them. I asked what was the

plan ? Why, said he, after we have taken the arsenals and guard-houses, then we will set the town on fire, in different places, and as the whites come out we will slay them. If we were to set fire to the town first, the man in the steeple would give the alarm too soon. I am the Captain, said he, to take the lower guard-house and arsenal. But, I replied, when you are coming up the sentinel will give the alarm. He said he would advance a little distance ahead, and if he could only get a grip at his throat he was a gone man, for his sword was very sharp ; he had sharpened it, and made it so sharp it had cut his own finger, which he showed me. As to the arsenal on the Neck, he said that it was gone as sure as fate, Ned Bennett would manage that with the people from the country, and the people between Hibben's Ferry and Santee would land and take the upper guard-house. I then said, then this thing seems true. My man, said he, God has a hand in it, *we have been meeting for four years, and are not yet betrayed.* I told him I was afraid, after all, of the white people from the back country and Virginia, &c. He said that the blacks would collect so numerous from the country we need not fear the whites from the other parts, for when we have once got the city we can keep them all out. He asked if I had told my boys. I said no. Then, said he, you should do it, for Ned Bennett has his people pretty well ranged. But, said he, take care and don't mention it to those waiting men who receive presents of old coats, &c. from their masters, or they'll betray us. I will speak to them. We then parted, and I have not since conversed with him. He said the rising was to take place last Sunday night, 16th June—*That any of the colored people who said a word about this matter would be killed by the others. The little man, who can't be killed, shot, or taken, is named Jack, a Gullah Negro.* Peter said there was a French company in town of three hundred men, fully armed—that he was to see Monday Gell about expediting the rising."

IN SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY,

COUNTY, VA., August, 1831.

THE following facts "were narrated by the Rev. M. B. Cox, late Missionary to Liberia, soon after the event occurred." Immediately after the insurrection here named, a slaveholder went into the woods in quest of some of the insurgents, accompanied by a faithful slave, who had been the means of saving his life in time of the massacre. When they had been some time in the woods, the slave handed his musket to his master, informing him at the same time that he could not live a slave any longer, and requested him either to set him free or shoot him on the spot. The master took the gun from the hands of the slave, levelled it at his breast, and shot the faithful negro through the heart."

The leader of this insurrection and massacre was a slave by the name of *Nat Turner*, about thirty-one years of age, born the slave of Mr. Benjamin Turner, of Southampton County. From a child, Nat appears to have been the victim of superstition and fanaticism. He stimulated his comrades to join him in the massacre, by declaring to them that he had been commissioned by Jesus Christ, and that he was acting under inspired direction in what he was going to accomplish.

In the confession which he voluntarily made to Mr. Grey, while in prison, he says, "that in his childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on his mind, and laid the groundwork of the enthusiasm which terminated so fatally to many. Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I told them something, which my mother overhearing, said it happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related some things which went, in her opinion, to confirm it; others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing these things had happened, and caused them to say in my

hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had showed me things which happened before my birth." His parents strengthened him in this belief, and said in his presence, that he was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on his head and breast. Nat, as he grew up, was fully persuaded he was destined to accomplish some great purpose; his powers of mind appeared much superior to his fellow slaves; they looked up to him as a person guided by divine inspiration, which belief he ever inculcated by his austerity of life and manners.

After a variety of revelations from the spiritual world, Nat says, in his confession, that, "on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first—and by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work—and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men. And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the Sun last February, 1831,) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons. And immediately on the sign appearing in the heavens, the seal was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do, to four in whom I had the greatest confidence, (Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam.) It was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th July last. Many were the plans formed and rejected by us; and it affected my mind to such a degree that I fell sick, and the time passed without our coming to any determination how to commence—still forming new schemes and rejecting them, when the sign appeared again, which determined me not to wait longer."

Nat commenced the massacre by the murder of his master and family. He says, "since the commencement of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me. In fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment

to me. On Saturday evening, the 20th of August, it was agreed between Henry, Hark, and myself, to prepare a dinner the next day for the men we expected, and then to concert a plan, as we had not yet determined on any. Hark, on the following morning, brought a pig, and Henry, brandy; and being joined by Sam, Nelson, Will, and Jack, they prepared in the woods a dinner, where about three o'clock I joined them. I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how came he there; he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or lose his life. This was enough to put him in full confidence. Jack, I knew, was only a tool in the hands of Hark; it was quickly agreed we should commence at home, (Mr. J. Travis') on that night, and until we had armed and equipped ourselves, and gathered sufficient force, neither age nor sex was to be spared, (which was invariably adhered to.) We remained at the feast until about two hours in the night, when we went to the house and found Austin; they all went to the cider press and drank, except myself. On returning to the house, Hark went to the door with an axe, for the purpose of breaking it open, as we knew we were strong enough to murder the family, if they were awakened by the noise; but reflecting that it might create an alarm in the neighborhood, we determined to enter the house secretly, and murder them whilst sleeping. Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney, on which I ascended, and hoisting a window, entered and came down stairs, unbarred the door and removed the guns from their places. It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber; it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word. Will laid him dead with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment, not one of them awoke; there was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten until we had left the house and got some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it; we got here four guns

that would shoot, and several old muskets, with a pound or two of powder. We remained some time at the barn, where we paraded; I formed them in a line as soldiers, and after carrying them through all the manœuvres I was master of, marched them off to Mr. Salathiel Francis', about six hundred yards distant."

They proceeded in this manner from house to house, murdering all the whites they could find, their force augmenting as they proceeded, till they amounted to fifty or sixty in number, all mounted, armed with guns, axes, swords, and clubs. They then started for Jerusalem, and proceeded a few miles when they were met by a party of white men who fired upon them, and forced them to retreat. "On my way back, (says Nat,) I called at Mrs. Thomas's, Mrs. Spencer's, and several other places, the white families having fled, we found no more victims to gratify our thirst for blood; we stopped at Major Ridley's quarter for the night, and being joined by four of his men, with the recruits made since my defeat, we mustered now about forty strong.

"After placing out sentinels, I laid down to sleep, but was quickly roused by a great racket; starting up, I found some mounted, and others in great confusion; one of the sentinels having given the alarm that we were about to be attacked, I ordered some to ride round and reconnoitre, and on their return the others being more alarmed, not knowing who they were, fled in different ways, so that I was reduced to about twenty again; with this I determined to attempt to recruit, and proceed on to rally in the neighborhood I had left. Dr. Blunt's was the nearest house, which we reached just before day; on riding up the yard, Hark fired a gun. We expected Dr. Blunt and his family were at Major Ridley's, as I knew there was a company of men there: the gun was fired to ascertain if any of the family were at home, we were immediately fired upon and retreated, leaving several of my men. I do not know what became of them, as I never saw them afterwards. Pursuing our course back, and coming in sight of Captain Harris's, where we had been the day before, we discovered a party of white men at the house, on which all deserted me but two, (Jacob and Nat;) we concealed ourselves in the woods until near night, when I sent them in search of

Henry, Sam, Nelson, and Hark, and directed them to rally all they could, at the place we had had our dinner the Sunday before, where they would find me, and I accordingly returned there as soon as it was dark and remained until Wednesday evening, when discovering white men riding around the place as though they were looking for some one, and none of my men joining me, I concluded Jacob and Nat had been taken, and compelled to betray me. On this I gave up all hope for the present, and on Thursday night, after having supplied myself with provisions from Mr. Travis', I scratched a hole under a pile of fence rails in a field, where I concealed myself for six weeks, never leaving my hiding place but for a few minutes in the dead of the night to get water, which was very near; thinking by this time I could venture out, I began to go about in the night and eves-drop the houses in the neighborhood; pursuing this course for about a fortnight, and gathering little or no intelligence, afraid of speaking to any human being, and returning every morning to my cave before the dawn of day. I know not how long I might have led this life, if accident had not betrayed me. A dog in the neighborhood, passing by my hiding place one night while I was out, was attracted by some meat I had in my cave, and crawled in and stole it, and was coming out just as I returned. A few nights after, two negroes having started to go hunting with the same dog, and passed that way, the dog came again to the place, and having just gone out to walk about, discovered me and barked, on which, thinking myself discovered, I spoke to them to beg concealment. On making myself known they fled from me. Knowing then they would betray me, I immediately left my hiding place, and was pursued almost incessantly, until I was taken a fortnight afterwards by Mr. Benjamin Phipps, in a little hole I had dug out with my sword, for the purpose of concealment, under the top of a fallen tree. On Mr. Phipp's discovering the place of my concealment, he cocked his gun and aimed at me. I requested him not to shoot and I would give up, upon which he demanded my sword. I delivered it to him and he brought me to prison."

Nat was executed according to his sentence at Jerusalem, Nov. 11th, 1831. The number of white persons murdered in this insurrection was fifty-five.